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Catharine Cockburn on Unthinking Immaterial Substance: Souls, Space, and Related Matters

The early modern Catharine Cockburn wrote on a wide range of philosophical issues, and recent years have seen an increasing interest in her work. This paper explores her thesis that immaterial substance need not think. Drawing on existing scholarship, I explore the origin of this thesis in Cockburn, and show how she applies it in a novel way to space. This thesis provides a particularly useful entry point into Cockburn's philosophy, as it emphasises the importance of her metaphysics and connects with many of her further philosophical views. This paper shows that it is rewarding to consider Cockburn's philosophical views as a holistic system.

1 Introduction

The early eighteenth century thinker Catharine Cockburn (1679-1749) is best known as a playwright but, over the last twenty years, her philosophical tracts have gained recognition and attention¹. This paper will discuss a core part of Cockburn's metaphysics, her thesis that immaterial substance need not think. In holding this view, Cockburn is agreeing with John Locke, and disagreeing with Descartes. Drawing in part on existing literature, the first half of the paper will explore the origins of this thesis in Cockburn, and the second half will show how she applies it in a novel way to space. This thesis provides a particularly useful entry point into Cockburn's work for two reasons. First, it emphasises Cockburn's metaphysics, a part of her philosophy that is relatively understudied. Second, this thesis is connected to many of Cockburn's additional philosophical views, including her Lockean view of personal identity, feminism, moral philosophy, and Platonism. As it goes along, this paper will note these connections and provide links to the relevant scholarship, giving readers a wider sense of Cockburn's corpus.

The paper will proceed as follows. Section 2 explores the origins of Cockburn's thesis that immaterial substance need not think. Prior to Cockburn, this thesis was advanced in Locke's *Essay*. It was attacked soon after publication by Thomas Burnet, and Cockburn defends the thesis on Locke's behalf. This discussion reveals that Cockburn is at least partly motivated to hold the thesis as a result of her Lockean scepticism about substance. Cockburn's belief that immaterial substance need not think is not novel. However, as Section 3 argues, Cockburn goes on to *apply* the thesis in a wholly novel way: to produce a new conception of space as an immaterial, unintelligent substance. Section 4 offers some final thoughts.

¹ For biographies of Cockburn (*nee* Trotter) and wide overviews of her work, see Waithe (1991), Bolton (1993), Nuovo (2000), Kelley (2002), Broad (2002, 141-165), and Sheridan (2011). On Cockburn as a playwright, see Morgan (1989).

2 Why Immaterial Substance Need Not Think

2.1 Locke on immaterial substance and his critics

Cockburn discusses the thesis that immaterial substance need not think in the context of defending Locke. This section will briefly lay out the two parts of Locke's work that are pertinent to this defence, and detail an early critique of them.

The first is Locke's account of personal identity. Locke's "Of Identity and Diversity", was first published in 1694 as part of the second edition of *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*. Locke asks, What makes a person the *same* person over time? His famous answer runs as follows. '[A person] is a thinking intelligent Being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider it self as it self, the same thinking thing in different times and places; which it does only by that consciousness, which is inseparable from thinking... in this alone consists *personal Identity*' (II.xxvii.9). For Locke, to be the same person over time is to have the same consciousness. Locke distinguishes this notion of a 'person' from the notion of a 'man', a material human organism (II.xxviii.15); and the notion of a 'soul', an immaterial substance (II.xxviii.12). This brings us on to the second part of Locke's work that is of interest to us: his account of immaterial substance. Understanding it requires a little background.

In the early modern period, prominent thinkers such as Descartes claimed to understand the nature of substance. Descartes' *Principles of Philosophy* argues that there are two kinds of created substance: material and immaterial. Descartes claims that we can 'easily come to know' a substance through its attribute, the principal property that constitutes its nature and essence: 'extension in length, breadth and depth' constitutes the nature of material substance; and 'thought' constitutes the nature of immaterial substance (I:52-3).

Against philosophers such as Descartes, Locke denies that we can easily know substance. Locke accepts that some subject must support collections of qualities - such as colours or smells - and for this reason he allows that substances exist. However, he argues that our idea of substance is obscure, describing it as 'I know not what'² (II.xxiii.2-3). Locke's general scepticism concerning our knowledge of the nature or essence of substance leads him to deny the specific Cartesian claim that thought constitutes the nature of immaterial substance. Locke's view is not that immaterial substance *cannot* think; rather, his view is that - because we do not know the nature of any substance - we do not know that thinking constitutes the nature of immaterial substance. In an effort to overturn the Cartesian thesis that thinking constitutes the nature of immaterial substance, Locke argues that immaterial substances do not always think, and points to the case of sleep. As we saw above, Locke holds that we are always 'sensible' of thinking. As we

² For more on this, and an overview of the scholarly debates on how to read Locke's scepticism, see Uzgalis (2014).

are not sensible of thinking when asleep, this means that - assuming our souls remain whilst we sleep - our souls need not think (II.i.10). Locke claims that if our souls think whilst we are not aware of it, then during that period we are not the same person as our soul: 'If the Soul doth think in a sleeping Man [then]... It is certain, that Socrates asleep, and Socrates awake, is not the same Person' (II.i.11).

Immediately following publication, Locke's account of personal identity and immaterial substance became the subject of controversy. One of its early critics³ was Thomas Burnet, who anonymously published a pamphlet - *Remarks Upon An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1697a) - raising problems for many aspects of the *Essay*. We will focus on those concerning the thesis that immaterial substance need not think.

Burnet worries that this thesis threatens the immortality of the soul. In the course of leading up to this great objection, Burnet raises three smaller worries. First, Burnet wonders how one can observe that one's soul sometimes does not think; for when you do observe it, you think (Burnet, 1697a, 8). And, when we are asleep, we dream many 'childish Thoughts' in the 'silent Night' that we may not remember (Burnet, 1697a, 11). Second, Burnet does not understand how, if the soul is at any time utterly without thoughts, it begins to think again at the end of that unthinking interval (Burnet, 1697a, 9). Third, Burnet is 'utterly at a loss' how to frame 'any idea of a dead Soul, or of a Spirit without Life or Thoughts'. He argues that a soul must have some properties to distinguish it from 'Nothing' and 'Matter'; the implication is that, if a soul does not think, it cannot be so distinguished (Burnet, 1697a, 9).

Burnet goes on to set forth his 'great Concern': if the soul is sometimes without thoughts, then there is no security that after the body's death the soul will not be 'thoughtless and senseless, and so without Life' (Burnet, 1697a, 12). Burnet implies that the possibility of unthinking souls is incompatible with the immortality of the soul, writing that while Locke's claim that human souls will enjoy an afterlife is 'some comfort', he does not know how Locke will explain it (Burnet, 1697a, 12). In the seventeenth century this is a great concern indeed, as it impugns Locke's Christian belief in the immortal afterlife of the soul, effectively charging Locke with irreligion or atheism.

In response to Burnet's first pamphlet, Locke wrote a brief, brusque reply, barely touching on Burnet's arguments. For example, Locke responds to Burnet's worries concerning the immortality of the soul with a short statement of his belief in the 'revelation' of immortality

³ For more on the early critics of Locke's account, see Ayers (1991, 254-277) and Thiel (2011, 97-221).

through the Gospel (Locke, 1823, 188). Burnet was deeply offended by Locke's reply⁴ and published two further pamphlets - *Second Remarks* (1697b) and *Third Remarks* (1699) - expanding on his original criticisms. Locke did not reply to Burnet again. However, taking up Locke's pennon, Cockburn replied to Burnet on Locke's behalf.

2.2 Cockburn's defence of the thesis that immaterial substance need not think

Cockburn's *Defence of Mr. Locke's Essay of Human Understanding* (1702) is a response to Burnet. The *Defence* was published anonymously; in correspondence, Cockburn explains that this was because a woman's name 'would give a prejudice' against a work of this nature⁵. In the Preface, Cockburn expresses her admiration for Locke's *Essay*, and explains that she will defend it against the charge that it contains 'very dangerous' principles (Cockburn, 1702, 37). Burnet remained anonymous at this time, and Cockburn refers to him as the 'Remarker'.

We will consider Cockburn's defence of Locke's thesis that immaterial substance need not think. This treatment builds on brief discussions in Jacqueline Broad (2002, 154-5) and Jessica Gordon-Roth (forthcoming)⁶. I will discuss Cockburn's responses to Burnet's minor worries in turn, and then move on to his major objection.

Cockburn tackles Burnet's first difficulty by arguing that, for Locke, it is a 'contradiction' to say that a man thinks but is not conscious of it, as thinking consists in being conscious of it (Cockburn, 1702, 54). Using Locke's terminology, Cockburn restates Locke's argument concerning the sleeping man: 'He says indeed, that *if the soul can, whilst the body is sleeping, having its thinking and enjoyments apart, which the man is not at all conscious of; his soul, when he sleeps, and the man consisting of body and soul, when he is waking, are two persons*' (Cockburn, 1702, 54). She complains that Burnet's objection muddles the notions of soul, man, and person, and that - whilst Burnet may be using them to signify the same thing, and he can use the terms as he pleases - it is impossible to read Locke 'with the least attention' and not know that he uses the terms very differently (Cockburn, 1702, 55). '[U]nderstanding by *person*, as he does, *self consciousness*... wherever there are *two distinct incommunicable consciousnesses*, there are two distinct *persons*, though in the same substance' (Cockburn, 1702, 55-6). If one accepts that a person is self consciousness, then if the sleeping man and the waking man have independent streams of

⁴ Indeed, Burnet's indignation radiates off the pages: 'I know no good Reason you [Locke] can have for writing in such a snappish and peevish way... you ought not to take your Revenge, or ease your Spleen upon an inoffensive Pen' (Burnet, 1697b, 10).

⁵ Letter reprinted in Cockburn (1992, II: 155). Cockburn was so successful at concealing her identity that, on publication, it was speculated that the *Defence* was authored by Locke.

⁶ These scholars discuss many additional aspects of Cockburn's response to Burnet, including particularly her views on Locke's speculation that God could create thinking matter.

thought, they are two different persons. Against the charge⁷ that Cockburn has missed Locke's distinction between man and person, this discussion shows that she is absolutely aware of it. The only way that Burnet can reply to Cockburn is by rejecting Locke's account of personal identity altogether, a rejection that would require substantial further argument.

Kathryn Ready has argued that Cockburn's Lockean account of personal identity is connected to her feminism; I will briefly outline this connection. Conceptualising the self in terms of body or soul has historically contributed to women's subordination, as women's bodies and souls have been held inferior. Ready argues that Locke made it possible to conceptualise the self as a person, and that Locke's 'strikingly gender-neutral' definition of a person implies that *all* persons have the same powers of reason. Ready speculates that Cockburn was aware of the feminist potential of Locke's account⁸ and as such she had a 'special stake' in defending it (Ready, 2002, 563-570). Whilst Cockburn certainly holds feminist views⁹, it is difficult to confirm Ready's speculation because Cockburn does not provide an extended discussion of feminism, and nor does she elaborate on the precise relationship between persons and souls (perhaps because of her Lockean epistemic modesty).

To return to our main discussion, Cockburn draws on Lockean scepticism about substance to tackle Burnet's second and third minor difficulties. In response to the former, Cockburn objects that the fact we do not understand how souls begin to think again after an unthinking interval does not mean that it cannot be done. She points out that there are many 'common and visible' operations in nature that we do not understand - including how souls think at all, or pass from one thought to another, or recollect memories, or move bodies - and yet Burnet does not deny that these operations take place (Cockburn, 1702, 57). Cockburn is effectively pushing the burden of proof back onto Burnet. Either Burnet must explain how these operations in nature take place, an extremely difficult task; or, Burnet must explain why we accept some unexplained operations but not others.

Cockburn responds to Burnet's third difficulty - that of framing an idea of a spirit 'without Life or Thoughts' - by retorting, 'How a dead soul comes in here, I do not know' (Cockburn, 1702, 60). As Cockburn points out, Burnet seems to assume that if a spirit does not think, then it is dead. Against this assumption, Cockburn argues that life and thought can come

⁷ Thiel (2011, 166) writes of Cockburn, 'she holds (unlike Locke and yet attempting to defend Locke) that 'man' and 'person' are synonymous terms'. In support, Thiel cites Cockburn's statement, 'For *men* and *persons* in common use, and scripture language, are synonymous terms' (Cockburn, 1992, I: 307). Against Thiel, in this passage Cockburn is merely explaining that in common use 'man' and 'person' are synonymous; she is not advocating this view.

⁸ It is controversial whether Locke himself was. See Ready (2002, 565-9), Hirschmann & McClure (2007) and Goldie (2007).

⁹ For example, in correspondence, Cockburn argues that women 'are as capable of penetrating into the grounds of things, and reasoning justly' as men are; reprinted in Cockburn (2006, 227-8). On Cockburn's feminism see Kelley (2002), Ready (2002) and Broad (2002, 145-50).

apart: insects and plants have life but do not think (Cockburn, 1702, 60). It is difficult to see how Burnet could deny this, without either attributing thought to insects or plants, or denying life to them; neither position is attractive. Having tackled this assumption, Cockburn goes on to hang Burnet on a dilemma.

On the first horn, Cockburn argues that *if* the soul had no essential properties other than the power of thinking, then there can be no reason why matter may not have that power (Cockburn, 1702, 60-1). In other words, there would be no reason to restrict the power of thought to immaterial substance. As Burnet (1697a, 12-13) worries that the possibility of thinking matter leads to materialism and atheism, this position would be unacceptable to him. On the second horn, Cockburn argues, 'If it be said she [the soul] has other essential properties, without which she could not have the power of thinking, when the Remarker has found out what those properties are, he will then know what the soul is' (Cockburn, 1702, 61). If immaterial substance has other properties that uniquely grounds its power of thought, then it has other properties by which it can be distinguished from nothing or matter. On this horn, Burnet's objection that the unthinking soul cannot be distinguished is dissolved. Cockburn concludes by remonstrating that we should not 'make our knowledge the measure of things': our not having an idea of a thing is not sufficient to exclude it from being (Cockburn, 1702, 62).

Lastly, we arrive at Cockburn's response to Burnet's great concern. She opens her discussion by arguing that, even if the soul does always think, God could deprive it of being in the midst of its most 'vigorous reflections' (Cockburn, 1702, 53). Cockburn's reasoning is as follows. A theorist who holds that immaterial substance always thinks - such as Descartes, who argues that thought constitutes the nature of the soul - would believe that, should a soul cease to think, it would cease to exist. However, this does *not* entail that thinking souls will (or have) always exist; the Cartesian conception of the soul is compatible with God's power to create or destroy souls. With this defence of Locke in place, Cockburn goes on the offensive.

Burnet is a 'intellectualist': he holds that God *knows* what is morally right, such that God does what he knows to be good. In contrast, 'voluntarists' hold that God *will*s what is morally right, such that what God does is good. As an intellectualist, Burnet believes that human beings have a natural conscience - an inward moral sense of what is right - that is akin (although inferior) to God's. In the context of worrying that Locke is a voluntarist, Burnet writes that our natural conscience provides a 'presage' of 'Rewards and Punishments' (Burnet, 1699, 13). Burnet is arguing that our natural conscience gives us a presentiment of an afterlife, in which God will

reward or punish our actions in this life. As is well recognised in the scholarship¹⁰, Cockburn is also an intellectualist. Citing Burnet's views on natural conscience, Cockburn argues that these 'proofs' of the afterlife 'remain in their full force' notwithstanding the supposition that immaterial substance always thinks (Cockburn, 1702, 63). Essentially, Cockburn is arguing that we have independent reason to believe in the immortality of the soul, regardless of what (or, how little) we know of its nature. Short of retracting his beliefs concerning natural conscience - an implicitly untenable move - it is hard to see how Burnet could reply to this argument.

Drawing in part on Locke's account of personal identity and scepticism about substance, Cockburn has convincingly defended his thesis that immaterial substance need not think. On discovering that Cockburn authored the *Defence*, Locke wrote to her in late 1702, praising the 'strength and clearness' of her reasoning and the way she 'vanquished' his adversary¹¹. Although Cockburn's advocacy of this thesis is not novel, I argue below that Cockburn applies this thesis in a novel way: to space.

3 Cockburn on Space

This section will set out Cockburn's metaphysic of space, and then explain how it is grounded on her earlier views concerning immaterial substance. This discussion of Cockburn's account of space extends the existing scholarship found in Broad (2002, 158-163) and my (2013).

Cockburn's discussion of space comprises the second of her "Cursory Thoughts", prefixed to her *Remarks Upon some Writers on Morality* (1743). Cockburn sets herself against anti-realism about space, specifically the positions expounded in Edmund Law's *Origin of Evil* (1732) - an English translation of William King's Latin *De Origine Mali*, containing extensive notes by Law - and Isaac Watts' *Philosophical Essays on Various Subjects* (1733). Cockburn puts forward several arguments for realism about space. These include her empiricist claim that, like the idea of matter, the idea of space is early obtruded on the senses (Cockburn, 1743, 95). If one rejects the existence of space one must also reject the existence of matter, an implicitly unacceptable position (Cockburn, 1743, 95). Having argued that space is real, Cockburn sets out to determine its nature.

Cockburn accepts the Great Chain of Being, a metaphysic on which every possible kind of being - including plants, animals, men, and spirits - is instantiated in a hierarchy, differing from each other by gradual degrees. Cockburn's acceptance of the Great Chain provides

¹⁰ Cockburn's moral views have attracted more scholarship than any other area of her philosophy. See Bolton (1993), Broad (2002, 148-9), Sheridan (2007), Nuovo (2011, 249-264), Myers (2012, 66-70), Sund (2013), and Duran (2013).

¹¹ Reprinted in Locke (1982, 730-1).

evidence of her Platonism, as the Chain is rooted in the Platonic ‘principle of plenitude’ on which anything that can exist, does exist¹². For Cockburn, on this ‘scale of beings’ or ‘gradual progress in nature’, the most perfect example of an inferior species comes very near to the most imperfect example of the superior species above (Cockburn, 1743, 97). However, Cockburn argues that, as matters stand, our picture of the Great Chain is unfinished, for body and soul do not differ from each other by sufficiently gradual degrees. To fill this gap, Cockburn posits a further substance that partakes of the nature of both: ‘And why may not space be such a being... *an immaterial unintelligent substance, the place of bodies, and of spirits, having some of the properties of both*’ (Cockburn, 1743, 97). Space is posited as a third kind of substance, in addition to body and spirit: akin to matter, it is unintelligent; but, akin to spirit, it is immaterial.

I previously argued that Cockburn’s account of space is important because it can be construed as a ‘new’ solution to theological difficulties troubling early modern realist accounts of space. In this context, I add an unexplained remark: Cockburn’s account is unusual because Cockburn draws on Locke’s thesis that souls need not think in a novel way¹³. This paper explains and greatly expands on that remark, arguing that there is a sense in which Cockburn’s 1702 views on the soul *underlie* her 1743 account of space. This connection becomes apparent when Cockburn considers an objection that Law and Watts might make to her account of her space.

Referencing their work, Cockburn supposes that neither Law nor Watts would allow ‘an immaterial being, without the *power of thinking*’ (Cockburn, 1743, 100). This is of course correct, given that Law (1732, 3) states that the ‘substance of *Spirit* consists in the Powers of Thinking and acting’; and Watts (1733, 51-2) argues that spirit is a ‘Power of Cogitation or Thinking’. Cockburn engages with Watts’ position in some detail; before going any further we will examine it more closely.

Against Locke’s view that we cannot know the nature of immaterial substance, Watts argues that it is the power of thought. Echoing Burnet, Watts argues that if the soul ceases to think, he has no idea of what remains: ‘as far as my Ideas reach, a Soul ceases to be, if It ceases to think’ (Watts, 1733, 117). Watts argues that language is one source of the mistaken view that thought is not the substance of soul. On a ‘Grammatical View’ the names of qualities frequently end in suffixes such as ‘ing’ or ‘ity’; this might give rise to the mistaken belief that ‘thinking’ is a quality supported by a substance, rather than a substance itself (Watts, 1733, 65-8). For Watts, the Lockean supposition that there is some ‘utterly unknown’ being called substance carries dangerous consequences. For example, if the substances comprising body and mind are so much unknown, for all we know they may be the same substance, a view that could lead to materialism

¹² For more on Cockburn’s Platonism, see my (2013, 204-5).

¹³ See my (2013, 206).

(Watts, 1733, 60-61). Watts acknowledges that, whilst he leaves Descartes' account of matter 'at the Foot' of Newton, his views on the soul are Cartesian: 'the two Worlds of Matter and Mind stand at an utter and extreme Distance... so the Weakness of the Cartesian Hypothesis of Bodies... does by no means draw with it the Ruin of his Doctrine of Spirits' (Watts, 1733, v).

Cockburn tackles Watts' views in several ways. Her response to his claim that if you remove the power of thought from a spirit we have no idea of what is left echoes her earlier response to Burnet: she replies that the fact we do not have an idea of what remains does not mean that *nothing* remains, as our ignorance would not hinder a substance from remaining if it were there (Cockburn, 1743, 100). As in her *Defence*, Cockburn states that our ignorance of a substance is not sufficient reason to exclude it from existence (Cockburn, 1743, 101).

Cockburn goes on to attack Watts' claim that a power can be a substance, and his suggestion that his opponents have been misled by language:

I do not find myself so prejudiced by logical or grammatical ways of speaking, but that I could easily agree with this author... that a power of thinking may be the substance of spirit: actions and abilities (and I have no other idea of powers) seem unavoidably to imply some subject of them (Cockburn, 1743, 101).

Referencing her *Defence*, Cockburn explains that she has not found any new arguments to cause her to alter her previous sentiments, that from what we know of the human soul, thinking cannot be the substance of it (Cockburn, 1743, 101). Cockburn explains that the 'lesson' she learnt from Locke's *Essay* is that, from our ignorance of the nature of things, no conclusions can be drawn except concerning the narrowness of our understandings. As such, Cockburn argues that we have no need to fear the 'dangerous consequences' apprehended by Watts: our ignorance of the natures of body and mind does not entail that they are the same substance (Cockburn, 1743, 101).

Against this potential line of objection from Law and Watts - or, indeed, from any other thinker holding a Cartesian view of immaterial substance - Cockburn argues that, because we do not know the nature of immaterial substance, we must leave open the possibility of unthinking immaterial substances. This possibility *underlies* her account of space, in the sense that the possibility of unthinking immaterial substances is a necessary component of her account of space as an unthinking, immaterial substance.

Speculatively, Cockburn's views on unthinking immaterial substance may underlie her account of space in an additional sense, in that the former may have provided the *inspiration* for the latter. This speculation was prompted by reading Watts, who asks, 'I would fain know

wherein does this Bulk or Substance of the [unthinking] Soul... differ from so much mere Space?’ (Watts, 1733, 118). Watts, of course, conceives space as nothing, and he is implying that an unthinking soul would also be nothing. However, for Cockburn, an unthinking soul is a ‘something’. Perhaps Cockburn’s reflections on the bulk of an unthinking, immaterial soul provided the germ of her account of space.

4 Final Thoughts

This paper has argued that Cockburn applies the Lockean thesis that immaterial substance need not think in a new way: to develop a novel account of space. Our discussion belies the claim that Cockburn is not a particularly acute or consistent thinker¹⁴. Further, this paper has demonstrated that seemingly disparate parts of Cockburn’s corpus - including not least her views on the soul and on space - are connected in surprising ways. This suggests the need for a substantial, holistic study of Cockburn, treating her various views as part of a larger philosophic system¹⁵.

¹⁴ This charge is made by Leslie (1959-60, 639) and repeated in Kersey (1989, 12). Nuovo (2011, 248-9) provides a spirited rejection of Leslie’s charge. Nonetheless, Nuovo adds that, whilst Cockburn’s thoughts are original in the sense that they are her own, they are not novel in the sense that there is anything ‘altogether new’ in them. Against this, we have seen that that at least Cockburn’s account of space is original *and* novel.

¹⁵ I would like to thank Jacqui Broad, Martin Lenz, Samuel Rickless, and an anonymous referee for this journal for making helping comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

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